

Lonasee serves as role model to Native American students



Recently, Shawn Lonasee shared his successes at the Navajo Preparatory School's career fair. Being a Native American himself, Lonasee stood out at the Farmington, N.M., school event.

"I think I did turn a couple of heads with my presence there," he said. "They saw that a Native American could actually be part of a business that I am in."

Two years ago, Lonasee was hired by the NASA Johnson Space Center White Sands Test Facility (WSTF) in Las Cruces, N.M., as a mechanical engineer employed by Honeywell Technology Solutions. He works on special projects in the WSTF Propulsion Department, where he is

currently engaged in storage life testing on the U. S. Air Force's Minuteman propulsion system.

In addition to Lonasee, other residents of the Zuni Pueblo, including other WSTF employees and students from New Mexico State University (NMSU), also attended the job fair.

"I always was interested in taking things apart, especially anything with moving parts," Lonasee said. "So, I wanted to talk to students about pursuing their own interests. I think it's important that students decide what they want to do by middle school."

To spark that interest, Lonasee spoke at three different sessions. He talked about math courses and engineering degrees. He also showed a WSTF promotional video and answered the students' questions.

"Yes, it's worth it!" he told students. "It's worth all the hard work of going to school. Attend summer programs offered by the schools. Don't be stuck at home. Get used to the idea of leaving home, so you don't feel that you can't make it and are forced to come back."

But Lonasee does want to return to the Zuni Pueblo someday – voluntarily – so he can use the knowledge and skills he has acquired to benefit his Native American community.

"It was hard going to college. I joined the American Indian Program at NMSU. I had to adjust to being alone and did that by associating with people who were in the same position as I," he said. "I started to work with others in this support program. I would make copies, phone calls and arrange for tutoring, mentoring, or computer counseling for them. I also worked as an intramural activities coordinator for two-and-a-half years."

Lonasee stressed to the students that it is essential to plan for the future. "I wanted to tell the students to take advantage of the summer programs and see everything out there before they head off to college without knowing what they want to be," he said.

If they don't plan, the future might not be so bright. "It's a struggle. I've seen friends and relatives dead-ended after high school with no vision, goals or plans for further education," he said. "I was determined that I wouldn't go that route. I wanted to be a real benefit to my family."

Lonasee wishes to continue to mentor his community. Recently, he called his fifth grade teacher, Cecilia Einfalt, about establishing a career day where parents are invited too. Lonasee believes the career fair has great potential for parents to envision opportunities for their children. This will, in turn, bring the opportunities and experiences back to the community to benefit all.

Lonasee believes family support is a key to success. "Parental support was a very positive thing for me," he said, "and I want to foster better trust between parents, teachers and kids." ❖

Searching for the Middle Place

A CLOSER LOOK

When Shawn Lonasee visited the Navajo Preparatory School, his talk wasn't strictly about his work at WSTF. He also told of his roots.

"My home is two hours west of Albuquerque, 30 miles south of Gallup, near the Arizona border in the Zuni Pueblo," he said.

Lonasee explained to the student his pueblo's origin. "Once upon a time a big flood occurred in our pueblo, and a sea serpent appeared. He demanded sacrifices. Food was offered to the serpent, but he demanded human sacrifices," he said. "A small boy and girl were sacrificed. They walked into the water and drowned, but when the water receded, their images were found as if recreated in stone. Our pueblo was built in the shadow of this beautiful stone formation."

Lonasee then told the students how his ancestors came to establish the Zuni Pueblo. "We originated in the Grand Canyon, but our people were always walking and searching for what they called the Middle Place," he said. "The people were offered two eggs to decide where the Middle Place was. A beautiful egg and a plain, rather drab, egg were offered to us. Our people became divided, with some choosing the beautiful egg and others the plain one."

He then told the students what happened to the two groups. "Those that chose the colorful egg moved south. Today, we believe that they reside in the rain forests of South America. Their symbol became the colorful parrot," he said. "Those that chose the drab egg remained in the area and founded the Zuni Pueblo. The drab egg hatched into a Raven, which is a Zuni symbol of intelligence. We stayed in the area. We found our Middle Place."

Today, most members of the Zuni Pueblo make their living as silversmiths, artists, potters or as ceremonial weavers. The 10,000 inhabitants of the pueblo are centralized in a 3-square-mile valley, created by mesas and forested mountains.

Boot Camp-NASA Style

Story by Beth Nischik

Photos by James Blair

It's early in the morning on the Gilruth Center's soccer field. A small group has gathered there in the dark. They're waiting to sweat during the Gilruth's unique physical fitness class.

The idea behind the class is simple: Provide a complete workout encompassing all parts of the body. Yet the workout is anything but simple. The class is run boot-camp style, complete with several miles of running, as well as push-ups, sit-ups and jumping jacks. And that's all within the first 30 minutes of class.

Shannon Gaspard, an astronaut strength conditioning rehab specialist at Johnson Space Center, started the class this past spring. It was so popular a second class was offered this summer. Both classes met for six weeks. Participants showed up twice a week at 5:45 a.m. to give it their all.

The idea for this type of class came from an already established astronaut course in which every new astronaut class goes through a "boot camp," working out every day for two weeks. The class for the astronauts involves not only calisthenics but also the opportunity to work together as a team.

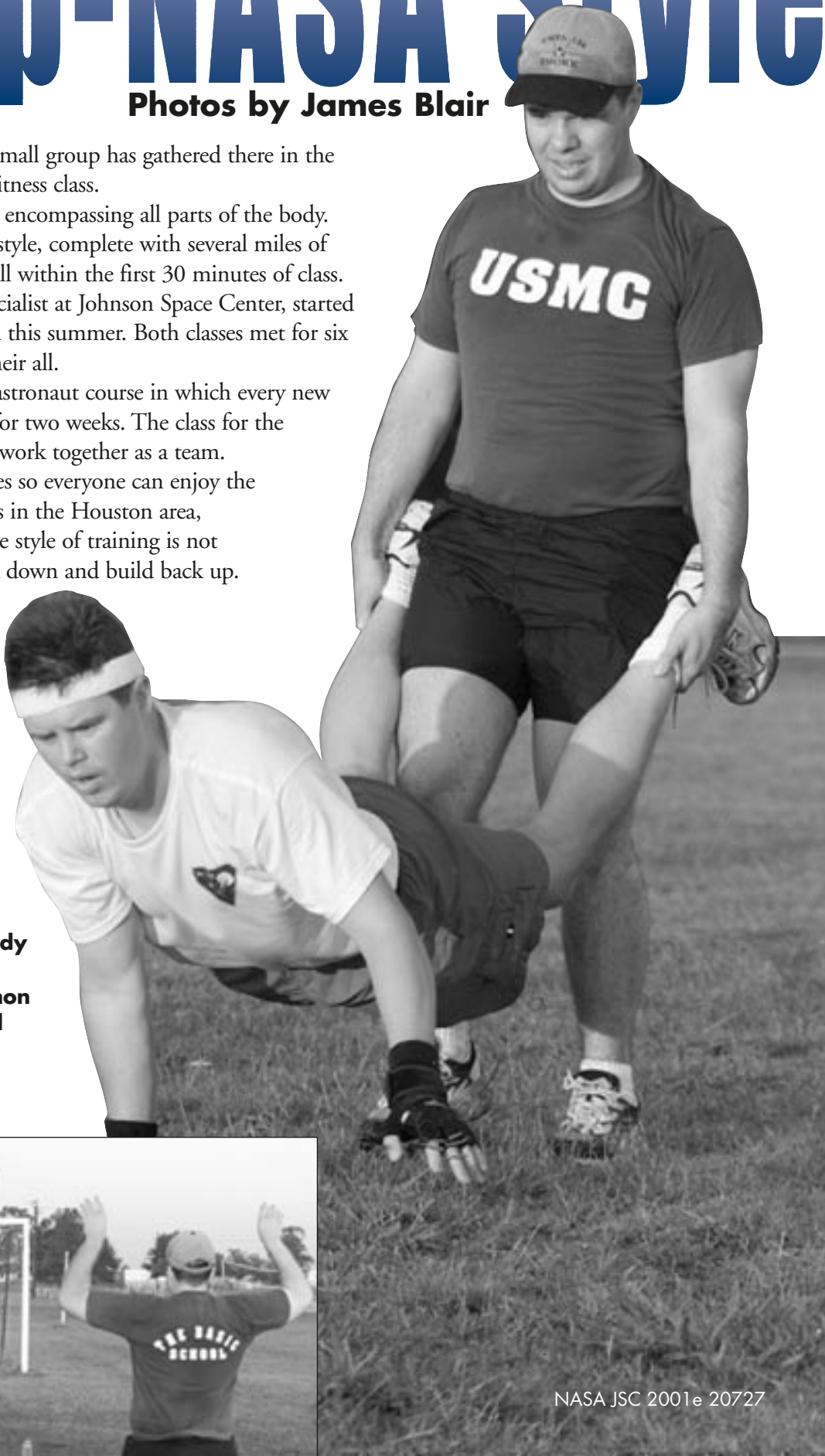
Gaspard wanted to make a boot camp available to JSC employees so everyone can enjoy the benefits. While the class competes with other military-style workouts in the Houston area, Gaspard is proud that the JSC program is different than others. "The style of training is not your military style torment," Gaspard said. "There's nothing to break down and build back up. This class is for fitness and health."

While there are team punishments, there are also team incentives. "During my workouts," she said, "I like to be encouraging but not degrading."

A third class will be offered in the fall. All participants are required to pass a medical examination or have a doctor's approval. Gaspard does not recommend this class for people who have problems running because it is a core element of the class.

For additional information on this and other exercise classes being offered, call the Gilruth at x33345. ♦

The Gilruth Center's newest class is not for the weak of body or mind. At right, Ray Scarborough assists Ed Robertson during the wheel barrow exercise. Below, instructor Shannon Gaspard leads jumping jacks. In the bottom photo, Krystal Haddock fights to complete an arm and leg lift exercise.



Profiles

By Brian Gonzalez



Robert Shelton

In April, Robert Shelton received the Employee of the Year Gold Award from the National Business and Disability Council.

The award recognizes personal achievements for recipients and makes corporations more aware that enhancing opportunities for people with disabilities makes good business sense, according to the council's award information.

However, this award means much more to Shelton, who serves as Learning Technologies Regional Center Project Manager. He thinks of it as cumulative recognition for his efforts, more like a lifetime achievement award.

"In periods in your life, you do a lot of work that is not recognized," Shelton said, adding that this award makes up for those times.

Shelton initially worked at JSC as a Co-op student in the Math/Physics Branch in the summers of 1971, 1972 and 1974. After completing his doctorate, Shelton was a professor at the University of Tennessee and Michigan Technological University. In 1987, he returned to JSC and has been here ever since. "Coming back here was like going back to graduate school," Shelton said. "I learned so much."

Born with congenital glaucoma, a condition involving increased pressure in the eye, Shelton experienced a dramatic change in his life around the time he turned 11. He lost the majority of his vision when a surgery to alleviate his condition went poorly.

Throughout elementary school, Shelton did not enjoy school. He found much of the work to be mundane. When he returned to school after losing his vision, however, he entered an entirely different world. An accommodating school administration made arrangements for Shelton to do more verbal work to facilitate learning with diminished sight.

This new way of working continued throughout high school and Shelton's career at Rice University, where he earned a bachelor's degree, master's degree and doctorate in mathematics. Throughout the years, JSC has been proactive in providing Shelton the support he needs to do his job. Even before screen readers and other assistive technology were implemented at NASA, the Center readily accommodated Shelton, even if it meant having someone read documents to him.

"NASA pioneered innovative ways to have disabled people contribute," Shelton said. "The agency was way out in front of Section 508."

Section 508 of the Federal Rehabilitation Act requires federal agencies to ensure that government electronic and information technology is accessible to employees and members of the public with disabilities.

Soon after additions and changes to Section 508 were implemented, Shelton was selected to assist in JSC's Section 508 compliance efforts. He serves as a representative to the NASA Section 508 Implementation Team. JSC was already doing what was necessary to provide accessibility, Shelton said. Section 508 just formalized the process. "In some way, it affects the way we all do business," Shelton said of Section 508.

Currently, Shelton works with his team to develop interactive learning tools for students and teachers. These programs are available online at prime.jsc.nasa.gov. "I took the education project on as an extra effort," Shelton said. "It gradually grew to consume all of my time."

His team's latest project, ROVER Ranch, is an online simulation designed to give students insight into robotic engineering. Another project, Qwhiz, allows students to explore an online game-show type environment that quizzes them about various subjects. Qwhiz also gives teachers the ability to make up new Qwhiz games with the online system.

"In his work for learning technologies, Bob has been able to get people with very different backgrounds to both work together and use their individual strengths to accomplish some pretty impressive tasks," said Chris Culbert, Shelton's former supervisor and current chief of the Robotic Systems Technology Branch.



Debra Johnson

During her 29-year career at JSC, Debra Johnson's strong work ethic has transformed the former cooperative education student into the Office of Procurement's Deputy Director.

"It goes without saying that hard work is a part of any successful career," she said. "Turning challenges into opportunities to become an expert in that area is what has made my career stand out."

Johnson came to JSC in 1973 as a business administration Co-op from Texas Southern University. Over the years, she worked her way up through the ranks of the Procurement Office. "The Center has really afforded me the opportunity for growth," she said.

Now, her hard work has paid off once more. On July 19, Johnson will receive the award for Corporate Responsibility at the Women of Color Government and Defense Technology Awards Conference in Washington, D.C.

The Corporate Responsibility Award recognizes a person working in government or defense who sparks commitments by an organization to support new opportunities for women and minorities in science and technology, according to application materials.

"I try to let people know that NASA is available for everybody," Johnson said. "It is an open society."

Johnson works with small and disadvantaged businesses through her role as the Center's Small Business Advisor and Small Disadvantaged Business Programs Lead.

"She has devoted herself unselfishly to be a guide and counselor to our organization," said Rhonda Cummings, vice president of Beststaff Technical Services.

Johnson believes mentorship is an important aspect of career development. "I've had different mentors at different levels," she said.

Mentoring is not just an activity for Johnson; it is a way of living. "My experiences are not my own but are there to share," Johnson said.

As she has climbed her way up the organizational ladder, Johnson has shared her experience with others to help them navigate the path to success.

Her advice is simple but important: "Find a mentor as soon as you can in your career and don't be afraid to seek different mentors as your career rises," Johnson said. "Some of the most influential people that I have met have not been directly in my career path."

She is a member of many committees and professional organizations, and she still finds opportunities to network through informal meetings, such as barbecues or sports.

Johnson is the JSC Acquisition Ombudsman, and she is a George M. Low Award evaluator. She also serves on the Traffic Appeals Board, the Exchange Council Scholarship Committee and the NASA Education Development Panel.

Johnson works to help others outside the JSC gates too. She serves as president of the Jack & Jill of America Greater Channel Chapter. Jack & Jill is an organization of mothers who seek to provide constructive educational, cultural, civic, recreational, social and service programs for children.

By reaching out to children in the inner city through church and organizations like Jack & Jill, Johnson exposes women and minorities to the opportunities available to them at NASA.

JSC is a place Johnson believes in and, after nearly 30 years of service, she still enjoys coming to work every day.

"I love working for NASA," Johnson said. "It is a thrill to be here."

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